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# Grasping the Nettle of Terrorism

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For America and Americans, burgeoning international terrorism poses a decidedly thorny dilemma. Among America's noblest, most admirable attributes are its love of openness and its aversion to governmental secrecy, its public regard for morality and virtue, its continuing preoccupation with the "decent respect to the opinions of mankind" enshrined in the Declaration of Independence's Preamble, and its reverence for law. Yet these very aspects of its national character, along with the behavior of some of its most important institutions—including Congress and the constitutionally protected free press—make this nation singularly vulnerable to the growing threat of terrorism, and make this a particularly difficult threat for America to counter.

This difficulty gets compounded by this society's pluralistic nature and the truth in the cliche that one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter. Almost all Americans oppose terrorism in the abstract. Nonetheless, many groups around the world that use violence and armed force to avenge or redress what they consider grievances, or to pursue their political objectives, have pockets of strong support in U.S. society.

## Outrage and Anger

In recent years, the most virulent terrorist attacks on specifically American targets, and on Americans, have been mounted by Shiite extremists inspired or instigated by Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini. Terrorist attacks against America and Americans, however, are not limited to the Middle East and are not mounted only by Shiite extremists. Nor are they confined to targets outside the U.S.

Each such terrorist incident inevitably prompts a spasm of outrage, recriminations and angry questions about the U.S.'s counterterrorist capabilities, questions on which recent events—instructionally, if ironically—have shed considerable light.

On the front page of its May 12 edition, the Washington Post prominently published a story alleging at least indirect Central Intelligence Agency complicity in a March 8 Beirut car bombing apparently targeted against a Shiite leader believed responsible for some of the just-mentioned terrorist attacks. The very fact of that story's publication, augmented by the media and congressional outcry it engendered, graphically illustrates why the U.S.'s response to the demonstrably burgeoning threat of international terrorism has so far been so ineffective. The fault, to paraphrase Shakespeare, is not in our stars, but in ourselves.

The attitudes reflected by that newspaper story and the response it evoked manifestly inhibit the government's development of the three keys to any effective address to terrorism's problems and threats: prevention, pre-emption (one form of prevention) and, when prevention fails, appropriate retaliation. All of these require superb, timely and accurate intelligence—of a kind that the ethos currently so prevalent in the U.S. media, and on Capitol Hill, makes it difficult if not impossible for U.S. intelligence services to acquire.

The kind of intelligence needed cannot be antiseptically collected by technology alone. Most of it can only be collected by the right kind of human sources, ones who can penetrate terrorist groups thoroughly enough to become privy to their targets, operational plans and timetables. This is not a task for Eagle Scouts.

Terrorists, generally, are unlovely zealots—ruthless, suspicious, frequently pathological and often paranoid. Terrorist leaders, even more so. Those admitted to their company are seldom the sort of people with whom watchdogs of governmental purity would like U.S. intelligence services to consort.

Advance information on terrorist plans and targets is usually kept within an even tighter circle of those who have proved themselves and their professed devotion to the terrorists' cause by stealing weapons or cars, robbing banks or successfully doing other things that congressional and media critics would be outraged to have U.S. intelligence services even indirectly "condone."

If or when intelligence on a planned terrorist attack is acquired, the very concrete, practical question then arises of how best to prevent that attack, or minimize its damage—preferably without compromising the sensitive, vulnerable sources and methods by which this important intelligence was obtained. In some cases, essentially passive protection measures—improved roadblocks, augmented guard forces, even removing assassination targets from the area—may provide the best answer. In others, more active pre-emption may be preferable.

In such situations, purely American resources—naval gunfire, air strikes, helicopters or troops—may be ill-suited to the task of pre-emption, or their use may entail an unacceptable risk of undesirable political or other consequences. Any development of non-American pre-emptive capabilities, however, inevitably requires dealing with foreign intelligence services or, at least, foreign nationals—who invariably have their own private agenda and priori-

ties, and over whom U.S. control can never be complete.

Furthermore, developing the essential intelligence on terrorists' plans and the capabilities needed to cope with their threats requires a level of security that current congressional and media attitudes make almost impossible for U.S. intelligence services to attain or preserve. In this sphere, loose lips cost lives. Terrorists dispose of even suspected informers in singularly unpleasant ways, and they have no compunction about launching their own pre-emptive strikes against even potential enemies or threats.

Foreign intelligence services and individuals whose assistance and cooperation the U.S. urgently needs are increasingly reluctant, quite understandably, to put their welfare, reputations and, above all, their lives hostage to U.S. discretion—particularly in light of the U.S. government's manifest inability to protect even its own secrets. Such trepidation and doubts are intensified by the very publication of stories such as the one the Washington Post featured so prominently—whether or not such stories have any basis in fact. With equal inevitability, such foreign concerns then get further intensified by the kind of public lathering that that particular newspaper story engendered.

In this sphere, it would be hard to overestimate the chilling effect abroad of gratuitous grandstanding on Capitol Hill. On May 13, for example, two members of the House Judiciary Committee—Reps. Patricia Schroeder (D., Colo.) and Don Edwards (D., Calif.)—introduced a resolution that would require the CIA to provide the House (not just its oversight committees) with "documents and factual information" about covert support for counterterrorist activities in the Middle East. In the real world, of course, any such information provided to the whole House would also soon be given, with minimal controls, to many members of its personal and committee staffs. Should any such resolution ever be seriously discussed, let alone passed, no sane foreign national or intelligence service would want to cooperate with the U.S. in any delicate or potentially risky counterterrorism endeavor.

When no warning is obtained or prevention fails, and terrorism against the U.S. and its citizens does occur, related problems bedevil the question of retaliation; for the operational imperatives for decisiveness, speed and secrecy run counter to the political imperatives of our conten-

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tious, open, democratic society. A response delay of more than 48 hours, 72 at the most, will render the exercise pointless. There is hence minimal time for decision, and almost none for debate—even within the government.

There is no time at all for public discussion or advance consensus building in support of a specific retaliatory action. Even if there were, any open, advance discussion would almost ensure operational failure. These facts, in turn, compound another problem. Given the intelligence difficulties just described, there can be no absolute guarantee that any retaliatory action taken in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack will indeed be directed against those who are actually guilty of that particular atrocity. Also, terrorists do not thoughtfully separate or segregate themselves from civilian innocents in order to aid retaliation. Any dramatic U.S. response to a terrorist depredation is therefore bound to produce unappetizing pictures on prime-time television, along with a rash of critical comment in U.S. newspapers and, among other places, on Capitol Hill.

In this regard, those who have been most active in thwarting—and articulate in opposing—concrete, practical steps necessary to develop U.S. intelligence and response capabilities needed to counter and combat terrorism can be confidently counted upon to charge "intelligence failure" whenever a new terrorist attack occurs, then cavil at any specific retaliatory action the U.S. even considers.

### Hard Questions, Painful Lessons

Coping with international terrorism and its threats, in short, requires grasping realities that few in our media, in Congress, in our governmental bureaucracy, or in any administration are willing to grasp. As a result, mounting terrorist attacks on U.S. installations and U.S. citizens have come to be widely perceived as easy and relatively riskless.

There are no easy answers to terrorism's thorny dilemma, let alone perfect ones—or any likely to be universally endorsed. There are only hard questions, and painful lessons about responses that do not work. Yet unless Americans in all walks of life become willing to confront these questions, candidly and realistically, they will have to keep relearning these unpalatable lessons at great cost. That would be truly tragic, since the tuition for them will continue to be denominated—and will have to be paid—in American lives.

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